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IF DANTE WERE ALIVE

The year of Dante's death, 1321, was in the very heart of the Middle Ages. As far as Christendom extended, the note of that age, notwithstanding all the many harsh discords, was unity. In Western Europe, certainly, there were, broadly speaking, one theology, one visible Church, two or at most three general types of civil government, one system of instruction, one dominant philosophy, and throughout most of that territory one type of land-tenure and military obligation. The memory of Roman unity had not faded, and the hope of attaining it once more was bright. Dante is in no respect so representative of the mediæval mind as in his desire for unity. Towards unity flowed the four main currents of his life.

His political effort may, at a superficial glance, appear to have been made in the direction of a division and not in the interest of unity. He was the author of a treatise, *De Monarchia*, in which he argued for a differentiation between the functions of Church and State,—the Pope to mind things spiritual, and the Emperor to rule in secular affairs. But observe that they were to govern the world jointly, in a union of purpose, though according to the maxim which Dante himself utters: "Quod potest fieri per unum, melius est per unum fieri quam per plura". If the head of the Holy Roman Empire had really established his authority over the whole of Western Europe, including all the petty principalities and city republics of Italy and the clans and kingdoms of the British Isles, with the Pope at his side as the spiritual representative of Christ, there would have been a better chance for unity than with either of these potentates usurping the functions of the other. Dante's political ideal was not realized, but his *De Monarchia* probably had some effect in checking such usurpations and leading to the modern theory that the separation of Church and State is more conducive to concord than a specious and irritating union can ever be.

Dante's effort in the field of philosophy was to demonstrate the unity of revelation with natural and historical truth; in other words, to coördinate Christian theology and the teachings of

Aristotle. He made attempts not only in the sphere of metaphysics and ethics, but even in biology and astronomy, to show that the Bible and Aristotle, used conjointly, could explain all mysteries and furnish an organon or instrument for further research. Aristotle, we must remember, was for Dante, as for mediæval thinkers in general, the supreme authority in science as well as the fountain-head of speculation. He was, in Dante's phrase, "il maestro di color che sanno". Now, however vain it may seem to a modern man to suppose either that Aristotle was an adequate authority in science or that Aristotle's teachings can be reconciled with all of the vast number of remarks made in the Bible upon an infinity of subjects, we must remember that for a period varying from two hundred to four hundred years, according to locality, this union of authorities was supposed to have been established, and that for good or ill it ruled the scholastic world.

Dante's effort in the field of philology was likewise made in the interest of unity. It is safe to say that no other man we have ever heard of, not even Martin Luther, accomplished so much as Dante towards establishing, indeed almost creating, a language. The Greeks, had he done such a work among them, would have given him divine honors, with Orpheus and those other few, who, in Sidney's phrase, were "the first of that country that made pens deliverers of their knowledge to their posterity". In his *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante tells us of his purpose and recounts, in part, the process by which he selected the dialect of Tuscany and elevated it above all other Italian dialects—Bolognese, Roman, Venetian, Apulian, and the rest—as the literary idiom of the peninsula. If ever a man performed a god-like task, it was this; for consider how slowly and by the operation of how many and varied causes languages generally rise to such eminence. Dante thus gave to all Italians who have lived since his time a common literary language. In so doing he opened to the Italian people a hope of intellectual unity and placed in their possession the chief instrument for accomplishing that hope.

The fourth of Dante's great efforts was literary, and here again his purpose was to establish unity. He attempted to

write, and he succeeded in writing, a universal poem,—a poem packed with all the learning of his time, glowing with all the color of his country's beauty and charm, vibrant with the strain of contemporary politics, tumultuous with private passion and family feud, arduous in its pursuit of philosophic truth, vast in design, minute in detail, and all subdued and harmonized to one clear chord,—the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. It is the chief single source of knowledge about mediæval man. It is still true to Italian character. It is the supreme Christian poem. It is, I believe, the greatest individual work of art created by any one human being. I have no desire to claim for the *Divine Comedy* beauty and charm equal to the beauty and charm of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*; or moral truth and motive power equal to the moral truth and motive power of the Bible; or vigor, splendor, and variety equal to the vigor, splendor, and variety of Shakespeare's plays; although these qualities it indeed possesses in magnificent profusion. The *Divine Comedy* is remarkable, even among these master-works, for the strict unity which binds into a perfect effect all the attributes, each in good measure, which make Homer and the Bible and Shakespeare glorious. It is the universal poem.

It is unfortunately true that there were many elements of discord at work in the world at the opening of the fourteenth century, and that Dante himself was envenomed with partisan hate and blinded by personal prejudice. These evils were nowhere so devastating as in Italy, and Dante was not only an Italian of the Italians, but a man of genius, and for that reason a man of intense intellectual passion. But his ideal, which he knew to be greater than his genius and purer than his passions, was the ideal of unity, and with all his disappointments, his countenance, when he died, six hundred years ago, may well have been irradiated with the glad knowledge that to a marvellous degree his dream had come true. Although the political and ecclesiastical structure which he endeavored to rear never was quite finished, for this we probably should be thankful. And he no doubt helped mightily to bring to pass, in due season, the unification of Italy. It is true also that the scholastic philosophy, which he illustrated so brilliantly, yet withal so naively, has been re-

duced to dust by "the unimaginable touch of time". But the Italian language, which he chose from among a dozen local dialects and dignified with his poetry, is a living and perpetual testimony to his foresight. His great poem endures, and seems likely to survive the ruins of all the gothic cathedrals and to breathe from its lines "the last enchantments of the Middle Age".

Nearly three years ago we, too, dreamed of unity. Wars were to cease. Nations, those artificial substitutes for real spiritual unions, were to alter their pretensions, and by surrendering a little of their sovereignty were to enter into a larger society and inherit a grander and less precarious life. It was a noble dream, worthy of our best selves. But, cheated by fears, plucked to earth and brought lower, I verily believe, than our true level, by listening to uninspired maxims, timidly accepting commonplace people at their own exorbitant valuation, and supposing that because they are commonplace their voice must be the voice of universal wisdom, we have deliberately chosen discord instead of unity. And so it has come to pass that in no year since 1321, if Dante could have returned to life again, would he have found Christendom less unified than in 1921.

The tendency of Western civilization since the Middle Ages has been towards disruption. I do not say that this has not often been a healthful tendency. What is not fully realized, however, is that the aspiration and the action of men, of leaders fully as much as of masses, have been directed towards a different object from the object dear to the mediæval mind. The object cherished by the mediæval mind was unity; the object most striven for by men of the Renaissance and of the modern time is diversity. Call it what you please—liberty, independence, self-expression, expansion, specialization, progress—the new ideal is exactly opposite to the old. The Revival of Learning disturbed the nice adjustment which the mediæval mind had made between Christian tradition and Greek philosophy, the pagan element of the compound being increased until the equipoise was broken. The Reformation would have been regarded by mediæval Christians as a second fulfillment of the prophecy: "They parted my garments among them, and upon

my vesture did they cast lots''; and they would have lamented that the seamless unity of Christ's Church was destroyed. The shifting of authority from the few to the many, from monarchs and aristocrats to the sovereign people, all that age-long movement which we term the political revolution, a movement which began in the Middle Ages themselves and is still going on,—this too would have shocked the mediæval mind. The separation of the physical and historical sciences from philosophy, and the differentiation of the sciences from one another—processes that marked the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and have been rich in material results—were contrary to mediæval ideas of unity in learning. A modern university would seem to a mediæval scholar something like a department-store without a manager, or like a heterogeneous mass of machinery without motive power or any reference to production or locomotion. "What is it for?" he would ask, and "whither does it tend?" If he were to pick up the catalogue of some general publisher or a copy of the *Times Literary Supplement* (either the London or the New York *Times*) he would say: "This is chaos. There is no order among all these books. They have nothing in common, except commonness, and no particular tendency except a tendency to be particular".

Now, I am by no means inclined to glorify the Middle Ages at the expense of modern civilization. When I read history I find myself almost always on the side of the Reformers, the Revolutionists, the Dissenters, the Apostles of Science. I have faith in Democracy. I am still holding on with both hands, in spite of many cruel disappointments and much pale apprehension, to the revolutionary doctrines of human equality and human perfectibility. I believe the world has made progress and will continue to make progress, and in saying this I am not thinking so much of mechanical improvement, or the combat against time and space, as of spiritual welfare. There is no reason to suppose that men were, in general, better or even happier in the Middle Ages than we were at the opening of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that a bewildering and inexpressible contrast would appear to Dante if, across the gulf of these six hundred years, he were to revisit the glimpses of the moon. He

would hardly recognize the world we live in as either Christian or civilized. In fact, it would not seem to him a world, or cosmos, at all, but a chaos of meaningless and restless change, with no unity of structure, direction, or purpose. He would entirely disapprove of those features of our life, precisely, in which most men now take the greatest pride. Our arrangements for physical comfort, our mechanical devices, would no doubt interest him, for he had an eye for such things in his own day; but he would, I fancy, regard them as having come between us and God. And when he looked into our political, educational, and religious systems, or fragments of systems and denials of system, he would turn away with condemnation written in the folds of his august brow.

We have made poor use of our eyes and ears and are stupid readers of history if we have not noticed that the rate of change has been much accelerated in recent years. Whether we applaud or regret the tendencies of our age, we must admit that they are increasingly centrifugal and that their velocity is increasing. It behooves us, therefore, to measure, if we can, the force and direction of these tendencies, or we may be swept by them whither we would not.

In order to make these measurements, we must find some point of departure, some place of relatively stable conditions. We should, if possible, go back to some position of unity, from which to estimate the extent of our diversity. There is no point of this kind nearer than the early part of the fourteenth century, and it is a singular advantage that no other period of the world's history has had its culture so accurately and yet broadly described in a single work. A strange thing, is it not, that a poem which professes to narrate a journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, should be actually a picture of human society in Italy? Strange that a poem whose theme is eternity should be our best means of understanding the fourteenth century! But stranger still is the case if we are right in thinking that no other poem or work of art whatsoever can help us so much to an understanding of our own country and our own times. In land-surveying, as in astronomy, the longer your base-line the more accurate will be your measurement of objects which, through dis-

tance or the intervention of impassable obstacles, are unattainable. So it is with measuring the force and direction of social movements. We can do it only by standing apart from them.

This great reason, among several others, is what gives so rich an educational value to the *Divine Comedy*. Of these other reasons, I need mention only its intrinsic poetical worth and beauty and the fact that it, more fully than any other human creation, reveals the mind and heart of him who made it. As a gross and ready proof of its poetic quality we may take its quotability. It is the most generally quoted of all poems, having great lines for all great occasions, and fine and subtle lines for many particular by-paths of thought and experience. In no respect, however, is it so remarkable as in its being, after all, not so much a work of art as a man speaking: it is Dante himself. Not Homer, not Vergil, not Shakespeare, not Milton, not Molière, so breathe in their works as Dante breathes in his. The great reason, with which we are now concerned, however, might be called its power as prophecy. The action of prophecy is to "rebuke the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgement"; and this action the *Divine Comedy* performs.

Thus it becomes evident that no other single work of literature possesses so high an educational value and should so certainly be included in any programme of advanced education. Its inclusion would be justified from yet another point of view. Modern attempts at education, especially in America, often fail to produce satisfactory results because they are scattering and superficial. They do not provide a centre of effort with a large body of material lying closely packed round that centre, and they do not require a discipline or a mastery of technique sufficiently thorough to enable a student to fight his way through from the circumference to the centre of this body of material. Energy is squandered, and self-command is not attained. The *Divine Comedy* offers itself as a centre towards which a student may work his way by the study of the Italian and Latin languages, the mythology of antiquity, the Bible, the Aristotelian metaphysics and ethics, the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas, and the history of Christendom down to the year 1300, and then out again from centre to circumference, through the æsthetic, scho-

lastic, political, and religious revolutions of the Renaissance and the last three centuries to a consideration of every large modern question that is not scientific. I do not say that a selection of the best Greek literature or of the best Latin literature might not serve the purpose as well. They have so served in the past, in the way they were taught in the English universities. I merely wish to suggest that the *Divine Comedy* has the advantage of being a single work, to equal the scope of which you would have to pile, for your Greek centre, Plato upon Euripides and Euripides on Homer, and then add a dome of clouds and lightning for Aristophanes; and your Latin centre would be at least equally composite. If a student will attach himself to Dante for three or four or five years, reading up to him and into him, and then away from him, trying to place himself in Dante's age and country, and then applying to modern conditions some of Dante's wisdom, he will be a well-educated man, except on that side alone which science affects.

It is the general complaint of the headmasters of private schools, the principals of public high schools, and the presidents of colleges, that education lacks a centre. They have reluctantly given up the centre which classical literature afforded and are afraid to adopt the one that natural science offers. They have here and there tried the ideal of public service, making the hub of the wheel consist of "civil government", or sociology, or economics, but the experiment fails because the hub is not big enough to accommodate all the spokes that a perfect wheel requires. Considering the immensity of scientific knowledge which has to be reckoned with, no one wheel is enough. Modern education must move forward on an axle sustained by two wheels, one constructed of scientific studies, the other of humanistic. I will back the teachers of science to construct their wheel on sound principles within the next thirty years; but unless the teachers of the humanities are willing to return to the old classical model they must look for a substitute. In case they think, as they apparently do, that the youth of to-day are too unmanageable or too feeble-minded for the discipline of the ancient classics, they will find no substitute so well fitted for the purpose as the *Divine Comedy*. In all American colleges and

universities, as the statistics of elective choices show, the attempt is being made to find one centre of humanistic training in English literature and another in a jumble of historico-politico-economic studies. The attempt fails in both directions, because in neither is there a sufficiently simple and yet difficult block of material at the heart of the subject. Dante furnishes such a block for education.

In religion, likewise, a fresh and sound impulse would be given to modern society by the study of Dante. The impact between the fluctuating modern mind and Dante's rigid theology would be tremendous. In Dante is made manifest not only the glory of historic orthodoxy, but its incompatibility with the deepest and sweetest human morality; orthodoxy would be finally shattered by the touch of those sympathies which the heart of modern man cherishes as its real religion, and at last we should know where we stand with reference to the "rock of ages" on which Dante so firmly placed his feet. It is hardly to be supposed that the soft, flexible, and wary religious spirit of to-day, beautiful and variegated as a butterfly, ambitious as an eagle, tender as a dove, will settle permanently on that rock; rather will it learn what to avoid. At any rate, an acquaintance with something so stern and stationary would be instructive.

It is in the field of politics, however, that the study of Dante would be most fruitful in wisdom and entertainment. The amusement would be of that dry Aristophanic quality which tends to produce not laughter so much as grinding of teeth. There is joy in knowledge, but the first knowledge that comes to a disciple of Dante as he surveys the scene of contemporary politics is bitter. Our young people are complaining because all the great preachers and every living poet worthy of the name are telling them that this is an evil world, and that an abyss yawns ahead into which we shall all plunge, unless——. The happiness natural to their youth is being poisoned. Well, I am afraid Dante would hold the cup still closer to their lips. And we must drink it out before it can be refilled, with the water of hope and strength. Dante's conception of the Kingdom of God as the goal of political and social life is unrelenting, with all its promise and splendor. No disciple of Dante can take a frivolous, easy-going view

of social and political conditions. He can neither rest in selfish individualism nor trust in a dream of coöperative ease. The seriousness of Dante, his clear perception of the temporary character of all outward show and sensual satisfaction, lift his disciples above vulgarity. They walk in the light of eternity, neither strutting nor creeping, for they have some perception of the soul's worth. In their lighter mood, they wonder what Dante, were he to come alive again, would write about America to-day. Whom of us, what living individuals and what historical personages would he consign to Hell, and whom to Purgatory, and whom to Paradise? What ingenious and appropriate punishments would he invent for the grafter, the profiteer, the corrupt politician? What destiny of undying scorn would he devise for the voiceless neuter? What grim smile would he bestow, like a plague, upon the ostentatious upstart and the idle or much-divorced rich? How surely would he see through the designs of the Irish agitators in America and how clearly expose their dealings with our demagogues! In his *Paradise* there is the Rose of the Blessed, every petal the throne of a saint, and all as definitely fixed and assigned as are the desks in the United States Senate chamber, but otherwise occupied. He would not hesitate to evoke a corresponding pageant in a new *Inferno*. Would he not repeat, with reference to our failure to enter the League of Nations, those bitter words which he applied to the Pope Celestine who preferred his own comfort to the welfare of the Church?—

“Guardai, e vidi l'ombra di colui
Che fece per viltate il gran rifiuto.”

I fancy his American epic would consist of two parts, which might be called the Cup of Purgation and the Cup of Healing. Whether proffered by a poet or by some consuming plague of war and disaster, we cannot put by the Cup of Purgation if we are ever to be found worthy to drink the Cup of Healing.

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